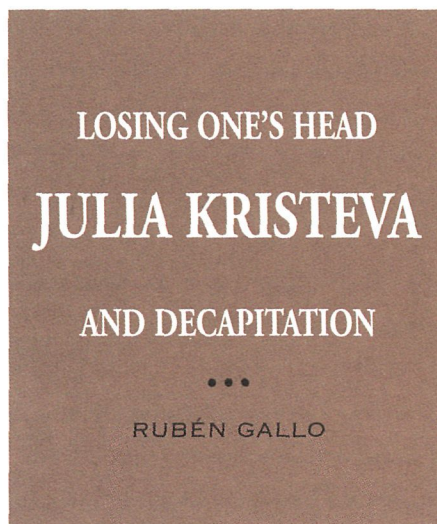


In his writings on mimetism, Roger Caillois argued that the praying mantis, unlike any other insect, has fascinated all civilizations since time immemorial. The strange creature – famous for its custom of chopping off and devouring the male’s head during copulation – figures prominently in the myths, legends and rituals of cultures around the globe. Caillois concluded that the praying mantis should be seen as irrefutable proof that the universal obsession with the figure of the dangerous woman – the *femme fatale* whose most terrifying avatars included the decapitating Judiths and Salomes of the world – had a biological origin. The decapitating impulse that existed as instinctual behavior in insects – the least evolved beings in the animal kingdom – has persisted in humans – the most evolved – as a mythology. [1]

Recently, Julia Kristeva has added a new twist to the universal fascination with decapitation. She has devoted a novel – *Possessions* (1996) [2] – and an exhibition – *Visions capitales* (Musée du Louvre, 1998) – to the analysis of this terrifying form of execution. Like Caillois, she acknowledges that the threat of losing one’s head – especially at the hands of a decapitating female – is not only one of the most widespread myths in all civilizations, but also one of the oldest motifs in the history of art, which stretches as far back as 100,000 B.C., with the primitive worship of skulls. Both *Possessions* and *Visions capitales* depart from the premise that all forms of representation – and especially visual forms – are intricately intertwined with an experience of decapitation.

Possessions, Kristeva’s third novel, opens



when the headless body of Gloria Harrison, a sophisticated intellectual and translator, is found lying in a pool of blood in the imaginary and ruthlessly capitalist town of Santa Barbara (which was also the setting of *The Old Man and the Wolves*, her previous novel). This decapitation turns out to be extremely productive in terms of culture, since it serves to generate the complicated murder mystery that structures the novel. Stéphanie Délaour, a French journalist reporting the crime for a Parisian newspaper, lands the role of impromptu detective and becomes obsessed with solving the mystery. Stéphanie’s boundless curiosity – a playful avatar of the theory of negativity developed by Kristeva in *The Revolution of Poetic Language* – makes her stay in Santa Barbara until she resolves the puzzling crime. The list of characters (and suspects) is long: Stan Novak, Gloria’s self-absorbed husband and a painter “reminiscent of Wilhelm de Kooning” who died of a drug overdose in an Indian ashram; Jerry, the couple’s teenage son, an angelic deaf-mute who after years of speech therapy and “reeducation” has learned to express himself in a machine-like, high-pitched monotone; Pauline

Gadeau, the boy’s overbearing speech therapist whose maternal instincts have run out of control; Victor Zorine, a soft-spoken and brilliant psychiatrist who analyzes every turn of the mystery by invoking post-Freudian theories of child development and language acquisition.

Eventually, the investigation zeroes-in on Gloria’s lover, a corrupt art dealer named Michael Fish who had been seen leaving Gloria’s house the night of the crime, and is found to have stolen a number of valuable paintings from her collection. Eventually, Fish is arrested in Colombia, where his newly opened art gallery had been laundering drug money for the Medellín Cartel (an organization which is in league with Santa Barbara’s “atomic mafia” and its illicit trade of nuclear weapons). Fish, it turns out, had been captured thanks to a famous image of decapitation: Among the artworks he stole was a copy of Picasso’s *Femme à la collerette* – a cubist portrait of Marie-Thérèse Walter which depicts her head as if lying on a dish. The portrait, a fake, had actually been painted by Gloria’s son – whose inability to speak was compensated by an uncanny ability to replicate even the most difficult pictorial styles – and was easily located by Interpol’s art experts when Fish attempted to sell it. *Possessions* is thus structured by two decapitations: the initial crime which generates the mystery and the plot, and Picasso’s portrait – a pictorial severed head – which allows the crime to be solved and the novel to come to an end.

Picasso’s *Femme à la collerette* returns – as does the intricate relationship between representation and decapitation – in Kristeva’s essay for *Visions capitales*, an



Grünewald. *Cabeza gimiendo*. Louvre. París.



Andrea Solario. *Cabeza de San Juan Bautista*. Louvre, Paris.

exhibition which traces the genealogy of decapitation in European art. Here Picasso's portrait becomes another item in of the long lineage of severed heads that includes depictions of Medusa, Mary Magdalene, Saint John the Baptist, the Holy Shroud, Judith, Delilah, and even Dr. Guillotin, the infamous inventor and namesake of the guillotine.

In the opening pages of the catalogue, Kristeva explains that representations of severed heads not only exert their powers of fascination upon us, but they can also "offer to use humans, as absorbed as we are by technical matters, an experience of the sacred." [3] "Because the sacred," Kristeva assures us,

"or at least the nostalgia for the sacred that has remained in us, does not reside in sacrifice, or in this or that [...] religious tradition, but in the specifically human experience which is the *capacity to represent*." [4] The images of severed heads gathered in *Visions capitales* are sacred because they sublimate a heinous crime into a work of art, thus teaching the viewers that "the only possible redemption is... representation." [5] Depictions of decapitation thus confirm Kristeva's argument in *The Revolution in Poetic Language*— that physical violence can be sublimated into a symbolic violence that gives rise to the most intense creations of art and literature,

At this point, most readers would probably raise their eyebrows. An experience of the sacred? Redemption? Sublimation? These are all words that do not sit well with a postmodern readership raised on theories of simulacra and the arbitrary nature of the sign. Such a deployment of mystical vocabulary might even evoke the phantoms of a Michael Fried proclaiming that "presentness is grace," or a Clement Greenberg rambling about the plenitude and "all-at-onceness" that characterizes the viewing of abstract art. [6] We might be tempted to ask if the theory of vision presented in *Visions capitales* – with its insistence on the redemptive and sacred powers of art – is not a Modernist comeback in disguise.

A closer analysis, however, reveals that there are several crucial differences between Kristeva's theory of vision and its Modernist counterpart. For one, Modernism posited the viewing subject as the absolute master of the gaze. The numerous diagrams drawn since the Renaissance to illustrate the workings of one-point perspective – the backbone of Modernist visual theories – inescapably position the viewer as the origin of the coordinates of vision. We find a perfect embodiment of Modernist vision – and of the perspectival diagram – in Roger Fry, the English art critic who would lecture for hours before a full auditorium, telling his audience how to look at the masterpieces of Western art. "He," recount Virginia Woolf and Rosalind Krauss, "could lay bare the very moment of perception." But despite his sensitivity and erudition, there was one thing which everyone, except Fry, could see: "the outline of the man against the screen." [7] Fry, obsessed with mastering the field of vision that lay before him, was apparently aware of even the most

minute visual detail, except for his own status as a viewing subject – the fact that he not only saw but was also seen.

Kristeva's theory of vision could not be more different from the vision embodied by Roger Fry. If Modernism insists on the plenitude of the viewer, Kristeva sees vision as structured by a fundamental *lack*. Revising Freud's and Lacan's accounts of child development, Kristeva explains that at a certain stage in his development, the child learns that he must be separated – increasingly more often and for longer periods of time – from the mother's body. This temporary loss "makes the child irremediably sad" and throws him into a primal depression. At this point the child is at his most vulnerable, and – as André Green has shown [8] – if something were to happen to the mother, were she to die, to fall ill, to leave on a long trip – the infant would remain trapped forever in this mournful state and would probably perish. "If my mother is as if dead," explains Kristeva, "should not I also die, should not I kill myself, kill my thoughts, stop eating and speaking?" [9]

Most children, however, surpass this crucial stage by substituting an *image* for the temporarily lost mother. "They," Kristeva tells us, "replace the absent face [of the mother], a source of love and fear, of joy and dread, by... a representation [of the absent mother]." Representation thus emerges as a strategy to cover up the loss that necessarily comes about with our passage into subjectivity. The visual sign – like its linguistic counterpart —, is permanently marked by the fundamental absence that it seeks to cover. "The sign," Kristeva concludes, "is [...] precisely what symbolizes the object in the absence of the object itself [...]. That which

represents, arbitrarily or by force of convention, its lost referent." [10]

The act of decapitation is thus an apt metaphor for the process that gives rise to vision: The child has lost his mother, and the first image that he conjures up to cover up his loss – his first representation – is the mother's face, which appears in his mind as a solitary head, cut off from the maternal body. "The loss [of the mother] is soothed first by hallucinations of the maternal face, then by its verbal designation." [11] In other words, in order to enter the realm of visual and linguistic signs, the child must first symbolically decapitate his mother. "I replace a capital disappearance," concludes Kristeva, "with a capital vision: my hallucinations and my words." [12]

We thus see that Kristeva's theory differs greatly from the Modernist account of vision as plenitude. For Kristeva, the viewer – insofar as he is a subject – is always structured by an underlying lack. Absence lies at the heart of all vision, of all language, of all forms of representation. Vision is merely an imperfect substitute for a primal loss from which no one ever fully recovers.

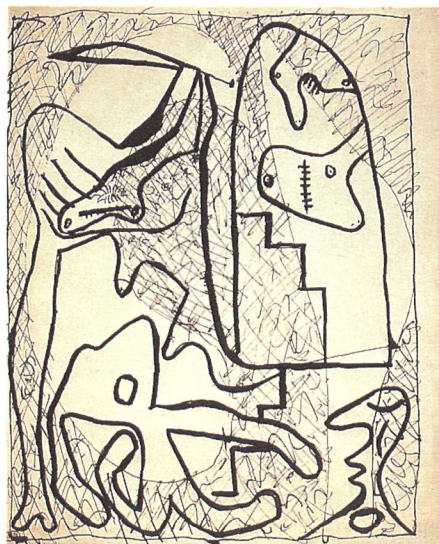
But even if the imperfect Kristevan subject differs from the all-powerful viewer – a skeptical reader might object – the *experience* of vision described in *Visions capitales* still sounds too much like Modernist accounts of perception. Kristeva describes vision as a "sacred experience" that can lead us to "the emancipating utopia of an ecstatic freedom." [13] Does this not remind us of Greenberg – our skeptical reader might continue – and his account of a mystical vision in which the viewer is likewise "summoned and gathered into one point

in the continuum of duration" and becomes "for the moment, selfless and in a sense entirely identified with the object[...]."? [14]

Once again, however, we discover that despite these apparent similarities, Kristeva's theory of seeing is at odds with Greenbergian Modernism. It is true that Kristeva repeatedly invokes the powers of the sacred, but in her account this notion has nothing in common with Greenberg's perceptual mysticism. Kristeva's concept of the sacred has more to do with the experience of transgression and its traumatic consequences than with the visual nirvana described by Modernist critics. Kristeva considers vision as sacred not only because of its traumatic origin – it was born a strategy to ward off the trauma produced by the mother's loss – but also because of its powers of transgression. Certain visions are transgressive because they transport the viewer to psychic extremes. To clarify the concept of a sacred, transgressive vision, Kristeva introduces the distinction between two radically different forms of representation: the "icon" and the "figure."

Kristeva appropriates the terms "icon" and "figure" from a the medieval debate between iconoclasts and iconophiles over the status of images. At a time when iconoclasm had become the dominant doctrine of Christianity (in 730 The Byzantine Emperor Leo III had made it official), Saint Nicephorus, the author of a "Discourse against the iconoclasts," successfully defended representation by introducing the novel concept of the "economy of the icon." The icon, Nicephorus argued, was a form of representation that should be distinguished from traditional figuration, which merely sought to copy the visible

world. As opposed to the mimetic “figure,” the “icon” attempts to present a visual approximation – a “a circumscription” – of the invisible realm of the sacred. “The economy of the icon,” explains Kristeva, “promises a communion with the invisible [...] but ultimately withholds it from us.” Rather than showing or revealing, the icon limits its task to *suggesting and alluding*. But this roundabout strategy renders it more powerful than the “figure:” “Through the elliptic appearance of a gesture, [the icon] transports us into the very being of suffering or ecstasy.” [15]



Pablo Picasso. *Escena de decapitación*.
Museo Picasso, Paris.

The “icon,” we see, has less to do with an “aura” of reverence and saintliness than with the power of transporting the viewer into an intense state of joy or sorrow. Using more contemporary terminology, we could say that the icon, as opposed to mimetic representation, has the power to communicate a powerful dosage of *affect* – the electric element which Roland Barthes once called the *punctum* of the image. In fact the Kristevan differentiation between “figure” and

“icon” corresponds almost exactly to the Barthesian distinction between *studium* and *punctum* (with the sole difference that the latter terms are exclusively reserved for photographs).

In sharp contrast to the serene experience of viewing described by Greenberg and other Modernist critics, the Kristevan icon aligns vision with the *borderline experiences brought about by an excess of affect: love, ecstasy, madness, depression...* The icon communicates a dangerous vision, an intensity of energy that could easily pierce the subject’s protective shield and lead him to death. This is why the severed head – the depiction of a subjectivity being undone – is the ultimate sacred image, the ultimate icon.

Kristeva’s theory of vision has less to do with Modernism than with the radical concept of the sacred proposed by Roger Caillois, Georges Bataille, and the other members of the Collège de Sociologie. They, too, associated the sacred with a subjectivity pushed to its limits, to the point where the subject is threatened with dissolution into nothingness. Nothing fascinated the Collège more than the intensity afforded by death and by the psychic states close to death. As Caillois once put it, “*Tout ce qui ne se consomme pas, pourrit*” – all that does not extinguish itself, rots. [16]

Kristeva’s emphasis on the powers of decapitation firmly places her theory of vision as a direct descendant of the Collège de Sociologie’s exploration of the sacred. Like Kristeva, the founders of the Collège were drawn to the severed head as a powerful symbol – an “icon” – for the types of psychic extremes that fascinated them. Depictions and accounts of decapitation abound in the texts and

documents produced by the Collège: Decapitation, in one form or another, appears in “Acéphale,” the journal published by the group in the 1930s; in André Masson’s images of headless bodies; in Bataille’s writings – including the celebrated “The Big Toe” – calling for the dethronement of the reason; in Caillois’ essays on “The Praying Mantis” and “Sociology of the Executioner.” [17]

Of all the members of the Collège, it is with Caillois and Bataille that Kristeva’s theory of vision exhibits the closest affinity. Like Caillois, Kristeva is drawn to the scandalous possibility suggested by images of decapitation: The prospect that vision could run its course even after the head, the repository of reason, has been cut off. In “Sociology of the Executioner,” Caillois invokes a historical example of such an outrageous occurrence. During the reign of Louis XVI, he tells us, the executioner Sanson was known for his efficiency and expediency. “When he executed Lally-Tollendal,” Caillois writes, “The victim asked impatiently: ‘So, what are you waiting for?’” And Sanson provided the following response, whose horrific humor arises from the fact that one is addressing a corpse: “But Sir, it’s done. You may see yourself.” [18]

For Kristeva, as for the members of the Collège, the severed head is the ultimate icon. It points not only to a viewer pierced by the *punctum* of affect, but to a vision that continues after one has lost one’s head. No longer dominated by rationality, vision becomes wild; it is traversed by madness and given over to the death drive. In decapitation, the subject finds the last vision – Kristeva calls it “capital” –, the final flash before life is extinguished. It is a horrific experience, but once which – like all



Escuela francesa. *Cabeza de Luis XVI*.
Biblioteca Nacional de Francia, Paris.

manifestations of the sacred— also has a positive underside: it liberates the eye from the tyranny of rationality. In the vision afforded by decapitation, Kristeva tells us, “Man has escaped from his head like a prisoner from jail.” Headless, the viewing subject becomes “a being who ignores all prohibitions [...] an ego flooded by an excess of unconscious, which gives itself up to the other, and surpasses all limits and interdictions, in *jouissance* and ecstasy.” [19]

Kristeva’s appropriation of the severed head as an “icon” can be seen as the ultimate consequence of the Bataillean desire to break away from the tyranny of reason. We should remember that in “The Big Toe,” Bataille lamented that humans had violated the natural order by holding the thinking head in the highest esteem. All animals, Bataille explained, were structured by a horizontal axis that placed the mouth and the anus, the head and the genitals, on the same level. Man, however, insisted on holding his head above all other organs, thereby turning

the horizontal axis into a vertical one and imposing the rule of the mind over the lower body. But this unnatural, vertical order is a fragile one, and it comes undone whenever man succumbs to the drives. In moments of intense pain or pleasure – like the ecstatic “little death” of orgasm – the head is thrown back, as if through this instinctual gesture the subject were seeking a return to the horizontal alignment between the mouth and the lower organs. [20] The final outcome of Bataille’s logic, we can conclude, is decapitation: if the affect is intense enough, the head will be thrown back with such force that it *falls off*. Think, for example, of the way in which the ecstatic female faces in Salvador Dalí’s *Phenomenon of Ecstasy* (1933) – give the uncanny appearance of so many severed heads, floating in space, detached from their bodies...

We have come a long way from the type of vision posited by Modernist critics like Roger Fry and Clement Greenberg. In *Visions capitales*, the viewer is no longer the absolute master of the gaze, no longer the mighty tyrant of the senses; on the contrary, the viewer has been jolted out of his self-possession and has lost his head. Pierced by a vision overflowing with affect, the viewing subject is pushed to his limits, threatened with dissolution (which is the inevitable consequence of all sacred experiences) and loss. Unlike the armchair mysticism of Modernist critics, the Kristevan sacred is an borderline experience that leads to loss, madness, and ecstasy. Marx once said that communism had turned Hegel on its head. Perhaps it would not be entirely inaccurate to conclude that in our times, governed as they are by fundamentalism and new-age spirituality, Julia Kristeva has turned the sacred on its head.

NOTES

- [1] Roger Caillois. “La mante religieuse.” in *Le Mythe et l’homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), pp. 37-85.
- [2] Julia Kristeva. *Possessions* (Paris: Fayard, 1996).
- [3] Julia Kristeva. *Visions capitales* (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1998), p. 11.
- [4] *Ibid.*, p. 152. Emphasis in the original.
- [5] *Ibid.*, p. 11
- [6] Greenberg. “Modernist Painting.” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 91.
- [7] Rosalind Krauss. *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), p. 118.
- [8] See André Green. *Le travail du négatif* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1993).
- [9] Kristeva. *Visions capitales*, p. 14.
- [10] *Ibid.*
- [11] *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- [12] *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- [13] *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- [14] Greenberg, p. 91.
- [15] *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.
- [16] Roger Caillois. *L’homme et le sacré* (Paris: Gallimard, 1939), p. 184.
- [17] Roger Caillois. “Sociologie du Bourreau,” in *La communion des forts* (Mexico City: Ediciones Quetzal, 1943), pp. 17-37.
- [18] *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- [19] Kristeva. *Visions capitales*, pp. 151-152.
- [20] Georges Bataille. “The Big Toe,” in *Visions of Excess*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 20-23.

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AINSI PERISE LES TRAITRES A LA PATRIE.

«5 Août 1793. L’an 2^e de la République une indivisible, 2^e au terre 3^e au milieu de nos frères.»

Escuela francesa. *Ecce Custine*.
Museo Carnavalet, Paris.